

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 April 2009

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Colombia: Fenoco rail workers strike continues

Amidst speculation that negotiations will produce an agreement soon, the strike continues at Fenoco, the rail company that transports a major part of the coal extracted from mines in the Northern Colombian Department of César to the port of Ciénaga, on the Caribbean Sea. Negotiations are proceeding between the union that represents the strikers and Grummond, a US-based corporation that owns one of the largest mines in the region, and Swiss-based Glencore, the transnational corporation that owns Fenoco.

The 600 Fenoco strikers walked off their jobs on March 25, demanding recognition of their union. They have placed barricades across the rail tracks.

Colombia is South America's largest coal producer, with 60 percent of the output coming from César. The balance is produced in the Department of Guajira.

Cananea miners defy court order

Miners at the Cananea copper mine in Northern Mexico, on strike since July 2007, are defying a government court decision issued Tuesday mandating an end to their strike and terminating their employment with the mine owner, Grupo México. The entrances of the mine are currently barricaded by strikers.

The Mexican Mine and Metalworkers Union, which represents the miners, has indicated that it is appealing the court decision. Pending the appeal, union sources indicated that a stay has been issued mandating that security forces refrain from expelling the Cananea miners.

In its appeal to the Mexican courts, Grupo management successfully argued that the long strike and occupation had resulted in damages to the mine and equipment that made it impossible to reopen without major repairs. Therefore, Grupo argued, there are no jobs for miners to return to when the strike ends.

General strike in Chile to protest sackings and abuses

On April 16 a general strike took place in Chile to protest layoffs and labor abuses as a result of the global economic collapse. The strike, organized by the country's main labor federation, the Unitary Labor

Central (CUT,) also called on President Michelle Bachelet to carry out social reforms that prevent private corporations from laying off workers.

The slogan for the protest was "Workers must not pay for this crisis!" Chilean unemployment is on the rise. The official figure of 8.5 percent of the labor force, while high, does not give a true measure of the impact of the financial crisis on the working class. In addition to job cuts, workers' pension savings have lost much of their value.

This was the second national protest strike against the Bachelet administration. The first one took place in August of 2007. That one involved the mobilization of tens of thousands of workers against Bachelet's neo-liberal policies. The government responded with a massive police presence. Some 740 strikers were arrested and 50 were injured as a result of street battles between the police and the strikers.

This time the demonstrations were smaller. Some 10,000 strikers attended a rally in downtown Santiago. Clashes with the police did take place in Santiago neighborhoods when strikers attempted to set up barricades. Police responded with water cannon and tear gas. Press reports indicate that about 20 arrests were made. There were also marches and rallies in Valparaiso, Concepción and other Chilean cities.

Colombia: Negotiations in banana industry have reached a critical stage

The Union of Agricultural workers (SINTRAINAGRO) has been negotiating a new contract for banana plantation workers with AUGURA, the association that represents banana producers, but a strike appears imminent. SINTRAINAGRO has scheduled workers' assemblies to decide what step to take next. The assemblies will recommend either a May strike or accept arbitration. The vote will occur this Wednesday.

A big issue in the negotiations is the union's demand that the plantations hire workers directly and not use labor brokers as intermediaries. In addition, the union is holding out for a two-year contract with wage increases of 15 percent and 5 percent. SINTRAINAGRO is demanding a sliding scale of wages coupled to inflation, increases in the employer contributions to funds for workers' housing, health, education and recreation, and the establishment of a fund to compensate victims of guerrilla and paramilitary violence in the Urabá region, home to 333 banana plantations that cover 35,000 hectares. A large portion of that production is exported to the United States.

AUGURA denies that it intends to hire workers through third parties. However, it is demanding that SINTRAINAGRO accept a four-year contract. The plantation owners rejected SINTRAINAGRO wage demands, the sliding scale in particular, claiming that those costs are 'not quantifiable.' It insists that its wage and benefit offer, worth 105 million Colombian pesos, is the best that the industry can offer given the current economic climate. Such a claim is hard to justify. The banana growers represented by AUGURA largely export their product and profit from any depreciation of the peso. In 2007 the Colombian peso, currently 2,400 to a US dollar, gained 17 percent against that currency. This raised the dollar

value of plantation workers' wages and lowered growers' profits. The current financial crisis has reversed that phenomenon. The peso has lost its 2007 appreciation, raising plantation owners' profits and lowering the dollar value of wages and benefits.

Metal workers end strike in Coahuila, México

Four hundred workers at the Peñoles silver refinery returned to work last week after a 66-day strike. The new agreement between Peñoles and the Mexican Metal Workers Union provides a 6 percent wage increase and a 1 percent raise in benefits. Workers will get paid for the days that they were on strike and receive a 1 percent one-time bonus. The settlement is substantially below the 9 percent wage increase and 6 percent rise in benefits that the strikers had originally demanded.

Dominican Republic: Striking public health workers clash with police

On April 15 security forces in Santo Domingo attacked a march of striking public health workers. Six strikers were injured in the confrontation. The march by doctors, nurses, and other public health workers marked the first day of a three-day strike over wages and benefits and in defense of the country's public health system.

The public health doctors are demanding a minimum monthly salary of US \$1,700; other public health workers are demanding a 100 percent wage increase. In addition, the strikers oppose the dismantling of the current public health system, which is under attack by the government, and demand better equipment for hospitals and clinics.

The strikers were intercepted by police as the march was about to enter downtown Santo Domingo from the Dario Contreras Hospital in the eastern part of the city, where they had assembled. The police brutally shoved and beat the strikers and also used tear gas. A union spokesperson denounced Dominican President Leonel Fernández for the government's anti-democratic response to the doctor's mobilization.

Report: Deaths resulted from poor monitoring by OSHA program

A Labor Department audit has charged that a six-year-old program that targeted firms with poor safety records failed to carry out its mandate, resulting in dozens of additional deaths. The Enhanced Enforcement Program, directed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), was to have subjected companies with problem histories to more stringent monitoring and controls. Instead, poor record keeping, a failure to gather required data, a failure to conduct inspections, and rule changes that allowed some of the worst companies to escape monitoring plagued the program.

A memorandum to OSHA's director Donald Shalhoub charged the program was "not targeting the 'bad actors' the program is intended for." Rule changes in 2008 allowed the number of companies targeted by the program to drop from 719 in 2007 to 475 in 2008. The memorandum charged the changes redirected attention to companies with "low and medium gravity serious repeated violations."

The audit found that the failure to properly log fatalities within single companies or companies under the same owner resulted in subsequent

deaths that could have been prevented. Proper monitoring might have "deterred and abated workplace hazards at the worksites of 45 employers where 58 subsequent fatalities occurred." More than half of 282 fatalities that should have been included in the program were not properly logged.

Windsor municipal workers on strike

Last Saturday 1,400 inside city workers joined 400 outside workers in a strike that began April 16 in Windsor, Ontario following the breakdown of negotiations.

The workers are employed by the city of Windsor and organized in two bargaining units by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The strike by outside workers had already halted garbage and recycling pickups in the city along with a variety of other services. The services affected by the inside workers strike include parking enforcement, recreational programs and the issuing of licenses.

While the city has said it is not demanding wage cuts, reports from the union indicate that a main obstacle to a deal is a demand for cuts to the wages and benefits of new hires. The city is offering a lump-sum payment in lieu of wage increases, but the union is asking for wage hikes as well as a signing bonus. Mediated talks have so far failed to yield a settlement and no new talks are currently scheduled.

Janitors strike at B.C. school

Custodial staff at the post secondary British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) went on strike April 17, causing some classes to be cancelled when instructors refused to cross the picket line.

The janitors, who earn \$11.21 an hour, are asking for a wage increase of just under \$2.00 an hour. They rejected the latest offer by their employer of \$12.87 an hour.



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